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ABSTRACT

Advice on writing the history of a college is offered. Until recently, there appear to have been few examples of rigorous, ongoing programs to record the facts regarding the founding and development of colleges. One problem is that much of the historical and detailed information relative to the development of colleges is not found in one designated place on a campus. Another is the temptation to bias; writers of institutional histories must be true to the facts regardless of pressures to do otherwise. In addition to telling the history in an interesting way, there is considerable human interest involved in stories that depict faculty and student life and that also may add humor to the historical data. The assignment requires both qualitative and quantitative research. The institutional researcher needs to know where to locate the original data. Formal sources include writings by the faculty, student theses dealing with academic or curricular histories, state legislature records, and state archives. Further reading should be done from institutional self-studies and other accreditation documents, from annual reports, college catalogs and other school publications, departmental histories, records of interviews with retired faculty, and the archives of the local newspaper. The history can be organized by chronological periods or by topics. (SW)

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Some Directives for Writing an Institutional History

Ever since Alex Haley's Roots appeared as best seller in 1976, there has been a renewed interest in the study of individual and family geneology. Sudently, people in all walks of life and from every social level became interested in investigating their pedigrees and in knowing the details of family background. Many of these people knew little or nothing concerning this branch of study, but that made slight difference in view of the deep concern for one's roots.

Following the initial burst of interest in individual and family geneology, there came another movement, that for the study of the beginnings of society's institutions. Some businesses, even churches, but especially institutions of higher education in the United States, became enamored with the study of their ancestry, and err long it became a mark of status to at least begin the task of preparing a recorded institutional history. Although no statistics are available as yet, whenever educators meet the matter of one's institutional history is apt to surface. Seemingly, a considerable number of schools have completed the task to date and others are in progress. This is true for institutions whether they are public or non-public, large or small, prestigious or otherwise.

For the historian few assignments are more difficult to accomplish. First, most institutions until recently have had no designated historian, and no organized program to gather and conserve historical information. Generally universities of size established historical collections, or archives as part

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of the campus library system which included what was readily available, and whatever else might be donated by persons who were once involved in the actual making of institutional history. Until now, there appear to have been few examples of rigorous, on-going programs to record the facts regarding founding and development of institutions of higher education.

Further, much of the historical and detailed information relative to the development of institutions of higher education is not found in one designated place on any campus. Both individual departments and colleges of larger universities have prepared their own separate histories. Material may be found in government files especially in the case of public institutions and even in the private files of faculty members. No one knows what is available, where the material may be found, or what value, if any, some of it is to the would-be institutional historian. And once located, there are those guardians who would prefer not to have anyone examining the data they may have boarded for years. Also, the nature of the material, since it often consists of listings of subjects, numbers of students and graduates, makes transcription difficult and tedious. Last, but not least, the university historian bent on discovering the roots of his institution must write so as to present his superiors, both past and present, in the best light possible. Annual reports must be interpreted so as to indicate the achievement of the goals proposed. To do otherwise is to be thought guilty of disloyalty to one's collegues or to the institution itself.

A further statement relative to the dangers involved in writing an institutional history can be found in a monograph published by the Society of Professors of Education[2].

> Like all history, institutional history is never finished and ever subject to new interpretations. However, doing institutional history is also an especially difficult, frequently not very rewarding and sometimes even a dangerous enterprise. Institutional historians frequently face either a feast or a famine. They confront either an abundance of cluttered, unsorted, and uncatalogued materials or an institution which solved storage problems by destroying "all these old letters and papers." At times their serious efforts to account for an institution's development and its influence on the lives of people is confused with those who assemble chronicles of events to celebrate an institution's birthday. Chief among the dangers institutional historians face are: the tendency to write little more than a "London history," a "bureaucratic history"--an edited chronicle of "official statements" free of analysis, explanation, and interpretations; and the ever present temptation to allow the problems and concerns of the present to shape the past.

Considering the complex problems to be faced, just why do historians willingly assign themselves to such a task? First, there is genuine interest among university and college personnel in historical backgrounds, probably stemming in part from the conservative trend of contemporary society. Conservatism itself is inclined to look back at the past with its fixed values and consequent practices, rather than expand toward a new and uncertain future. Then, since higher education has been under attack, and is in a period of rapid change, there seems to be some need to examine once again the pains of birth and the difficult years of fighting for survival.

Finally, some of the more prestigious institutions published resumes of their history and thereafter, writing institutional history became the thing to do. There were university administrators who orally voiced concern that a history of their leadership be recorded or they would be left out of a major trend of this decade. So someone on the staff was named and the task was begun.

Some Guidelines

The writer charged with the task of producing a history of an institution of higher learning is first of all a scholar. That means the historian must be true to the facts regardless of pressures and invitations to do otherwise. The progress, for example of developing a lowly school of pedagogy into a state college, to a state university with the problems of integration on one hand and competition from other institutions on the other, requires a writer who is committed to the truth in spite of personalities who want the institution to appear as always on the right side.

Regarding style, in addition to telling the history as interestingly as possible, it is well to remember that there is a considerable amount of human interest involved. There are tales and stories which can be unearthed which depict faculty and student life and add humor to the historical data.

Few kinds of research are more demanding than that which is required of a university historian. Most of his readers will doubtless be the writer's colleagues, his administrators, authorities on the development of the institutions, now retired, and a host of people who will appear on campus later and learn that history for the first time. The assignment requires both qualitative and quantitative research leaving no stone unturned. The nature and sources of the material are often difficult to document and some ingenuity is required, but strict adherence to the rules of research is necessary or embarrassment to the writer will result err long.

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A major question at this point has to do with the sources available to the would-be institutional historian. A check of the literature and even a search through Educational Resources Information Center (ERIC), the nationwide network for storing and disseminating educational material, yielded nothing on how to write the history of an institution of learning. There are, however, a number of completed histories readily available, at least in abstract form. A recent issue of the quarterly journal, Educational Studies, refers to at least three of these.[3]

In addition to information on how to write a history, the institutional researcher needs to know where to locate the original data. Formal sources include writings by the faculty, such as those by a scholarly administrator including past presidents, Students, particularly those at the graduate level, may have produced theses dealing with academic or curricular histories. Then, there are records of state legislatures, especially valuable when recording the development of a state institution. In the same connection, one should not overlook state archives.

Further reading should be done from institutional self-studies and other accreditation documents, from annual reports, individual departmental histories, records of interviews with retired members of the faculty, and the archives of the local newspaper should be investigated. Usually the histories of local governments including city and county, and of the state will yield material for an institutional history. Formal sources include the publications of the institution such as college catagogues, class bulletins and schedules, and on-campus periodicals of both the administration and the student body. Student yearbooks provide an

especially fine source of anecdotal material.

Early in the process, the institutional historian must choose a type of organization for the final presentation of the material. It appears there are two major approaches, one of which is to organize the data under topics such as the faculty, the administration, curricula offerings, athletics, and the development of the physical campus. In most cases, however, it is better to organize by chronological periods of history, divided, for example for some schools, into early beginnings, expansion period, before and after the world wars, and the modern period.

One final word: The task of preparing a history of one's own institution of learning is not only difficult and tedious. If done properly may make the writer immortal; if done inadequately for whatever reasons, may adversely mark the writer forever. Through fraught with dangers, the task should be undertaken and completed.

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